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Review by Mary C. Brennan, Texas State University

In “The Possibilities and Limitations of First-Lady Diplomacy: Imelda Marcos and the Nixon Administration,” Dean Kotlowski brings together three important and under-examined areas of historical inquiry. First, he joins a recent spurt of scholarly studies of First Ladies around the world. Pushing beyond journalistic surface discussions of fashion and ‘causes,’ Kotlowski emphasizes the potential power of these women who occupy a very unique political position. Second, Kotlowski analyzes a diplomatic situation from a gendered perspective. He recognizes the way Philippine First Lady Imelda Marcos used the gendered stereotypes of her day to her advantage and the way this typecasting also worked against her. Last, and most significantly, even though Kotlowski focuses on international encounters between diplomats from the United States (U.S.) and the Philippines, he refuses to take an America-centric approach. He argues that while Marcos’s actions might not have had an impact on Filipino international standing or have even been seen as significant from an American perspective, the First Lady’s actions did serve her purpose back home.

Like many First Ladies, Imelda Marcos’s political actions derived from a combination of her husband’s political position and the cultural perceptions of women’s place in society. As Kotlowski explains, Imelda used her beauty-queen looks and charming personality to advance her husband’s career. She worked within acceptable boundaries of behavior (assuring the Filipino people that her husband was the true head of the family) even as she cultivated powerful men to ensure her husband’s election to office. Using the same traditionally feminine qualities, the First Lady helped her husband raise his political stature at home and abroad. She worked on his campaign as both fundraiser and unpaid (and unofficial) staff member. Perhaps most importantly, like First Ladies around the world, Imelda humanized her husband to the voting public. In 1965, they succeeded in winning the presidency; he remained in power either as elected president or as dictator until 1986.

During these years, according to Kotlowski, Imelda frequently served as an informal foreign ambassador. Marcos attempted to enhance the international recognition of her homeland by having tea with the Queen of England, gaining a private audience with Pope Paul VI, and dancing with U.S. President Lyndon Johnson. When Richard and Patricia Nixon visited Manila in 1969, she served as hostess at the formal reception and...
led the American First Lady on a tour that included orphanages and ended by showcasing her ‘baby,’ the Cultural Center of the Philippines. (341)

The interactions between the Nixons and the Marcoses, especially between President Richard Nixon and Imelda Marcos, are the main focus of Kotlowski’s article. Kotlowski uses several meetings between the U.S. President and the Philippine First Lady as a lens to discuss the ways Marcos exploited the potential power of the First Lady position. In the process, the author also exposes the weaknesses of her use of her informal power. Kotlowski argues that one of the limitations on the First Lady is that she is dependent on her husband’s political position and his good will. As the author shows, Ferdinand Marcos used his wife when he thought it would enhance his reputation within the Philippines, gave her more official power when it helped to strengthen his position in his country, and then blamed her for his downfall.

Kotlowski focuses on Imelda’s visit to the U.S. in 1970. Although re-elected in 1969, Marcos faced threats to his power from various student and dissident groups. He needed American support in a way he had not during his first election campaign in 1965. For his part, Nixon was consumed by his own domestic unrest, the continuing war in Vietnam, and laying the foundation for his later opening to China. The Philippines were low on his priority list. As such, when Marcos asked to meet with him, Nixon explained that he was too busy and it would have to wait at least a year. Marcos and his advisors found a way around the snub. They sent Imelda on a worldwide tour, ostensibly to return their son to school in England and to visit her doctor in the United States. A First Lady who managed to meet with both the Pope and the Queen could not be ignored by the U.S. President. The scheme was working very well until Imelda overplayed her hand. Flush with victory from her visit to Capitol Hill and success at a luncheon hosted by Patricia Nixon, Imelda met privately with the Philippine Officer in the State Department as preparation for her appointment with Nixon. Imelda misread the situation. She fell back on traditional stereotypes, dressing provocatively and using gendered language to try to gain support for the funds she would seek from Nixon. Unfortunately, as Kotlowski points out, Nixon’s men tended to be somewhat misogynistic, meaning that Marcos’s attempted seduction undermined her ability to influence Nixon to give her the money. She left without the loans her husband wanted, but with promises of aid for population control and rural electrification.

Far from a defeat, the Marcoses viewed Imelda’s trip as a success. Ferdinand was able to claim an enhanced relationship with the U.S.; Imelda used the trip as evidence of her abilities as a political figure. This was particularly important to her as she contemplated a run for office. Although she did not take up that challenge, Imelda did leverage her ‘success’ with the Nixon administration into an enhanced political role. Her popularity with segments of the Filipino population compelled her husband to grant her a larger role within the government. In fact, she revisited Washington several times, albeit with a decreasingly warm reception each time.

Based on solid research in the pertinent secondary sources and U.S. official records, Kotlowski’s article adds depth to the American perspective of Imelda Marcos. The author succeeds in transforming the Philippine First Lady from a shoe-buying caricature into an ambitious woman working within the parameters of her gender and her culture. By utilizing the Nixon administration’s official and unofficial records, Kotlowski exposes the frustration of the Nixon men in dealing with a woman such as Marcos who refused to be ignored.

As with many works dealing with First Ladies, this article lacks the voice of the main actor, Imelda Marcos. Kotlowski uses the existing biographies to their full extent and includes material from the main Filipino
newspapers, the *Manila Chronicle and the Manila Bulletin*. Still, his argument would have been enhanced with Imelda’s view of the situation. It could be that those records are not available.

That being said, this is a well-written and well-argued essay that makes a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the Nixon administration, U.S.-Philippine relations, and, especially, the power of First Ladies.

**Mary C. Brennan** is the author of three books: *Turning Right in the Sixties* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace*, (Boulder: Colorado University Press, 2008); and *Pat Nixon: Embattled First Lady* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011). Her next project investigates women and the Watergate scandal. She is currently the Chair of the History Department at Texas State University.

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